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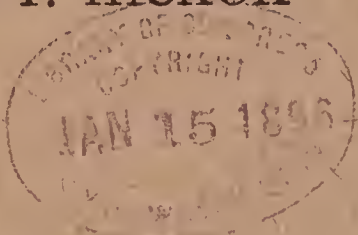
I AM BUT ONE

JUSTICE, NOT CHARITY

A NATIONALIST POEM

BY

HARRISON T. HICKOK



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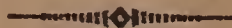
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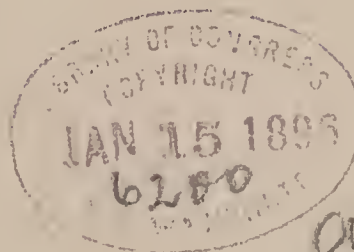
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I AM BUT ONE.

"The amount of effort alone is pertinent to the question of desert. All men who do their best do the same. A man's endowments, however godlike, merely fix the measure of his duty."

EDWARD BELLAMY.

This is the great ethical pedestal on which mankind have refused to stand, but on which they must finally place their feet or perish. The maxim, "To every man according to his deeds," is a false one, and the world will make no substantial progress till it is abandoned.

H. T. H.

AN aged man with bowed head
Was leaning at the wall as if
Half sleeping with exhaustion and
With care. His beard was long and white
But not yet quite unkept. His clothes
Were thin and in the cool crisp air
Protected ill the frame whose blood
Coursed feebly through the veins. He was
Not neat. The garments that he wore
Were all he had. There was no change.
What yesterday he wore he wore
To-day and must another day
And on till death should set him free.
His face was like a man who thinks:
His forehead high, his mouth and nose
Of Grecian mold. Tall, slim and like
A man of better days he stood,
Unconscious of the throngs who passed
Him by: and they in turn could not
Single this man from out the throng
That cold and hungry and forlorn
Choke up the ways of every mart.

On this old man there was no badge
To say "I more than yonder man [thought
Should claim your thought." And why your
At all? Why should the water and
The air, why should the food and bed
And garments that we wear be care
Of others than ourselves? As this
Old man still stood and faced the bleak
West wind, there passed him by a fair
Young form with face aglow and step
Elastic and with garments warm.
She had not in her person known
Of hunger nor of cold nor want
Nor feebleness nor yet neglect.
The sufferings of other men
She oft had seen, but only in
The mass. There comes a time when we
See, for the first, the things we oft
Before have seen, when first we touch
The things we oft have touched and hear
The sounds that oft have fallen on
The ears and waked no echo in
The mind. There comes a time when there
Will rise to consciousness in us
What has been seen and thought and felt
Before, but only as the brute
Sees, thinks and feels, unconscious and
Without a throb of pain. This girl
Had passed, before, a thousand poor
And wretched men half clad, half fed
And with despair upon the brow,
But she had seen them not; and oft
Had said, "This is but what must be.

No time it has not been. This path
If humbly trod will bring us near
And nearer still to God." This half
Unconscious she had said. She said
What those before had said. Her voice
Was but the echo of the past
And she knew not the meaning of
The words she spoke. What could have made
Her see this man as feeble and
Forlorn he leaned against the wall?
And yet she saw him; and she paused
And touched his hand that bloodless hung
Close pressed against his side. 'Twas cold
And thin, but not the hand of one
Who in the trenches delves for bread.
A chill ran through his frame as by
The touch the currents that had well
Nigh ceased to flow began again
Their coursing through the veins. "Old man,"
She said, "this is no place for one
So feeble and so old, thus clad,
To stand and sleep and face the cold."
He raised his head. "Pass on," he thought
The voice had said. But when he saw
This fair young face, this tender look,
He knew it was not written in
The book, that 'twas not form nor law,
But heart speaking to heart. He roused
Himself still more. "Old man," again
She said, "how dare you stand and face
This chill night air? Your hand is cold
As if the flesh and blood were run
In death's most cruel mold. Go get

You food and bed and fire and rest."
The old man smiled a ghastly smile.
So hopeless was his smile, so kin
Of hell, so lost to heaven that she
In very horror started back
And would have hurried on, and would
Have fled to escape the man as if
Already dead. He checked her with
His feeble, low and plaintive voice,
With words so fitly spoke she saw
Behind the hunger, cold and rags
A jeweled mind, culture and worth.
"Lady," said he, "speak not of food
And bed and fire to me; speak not
Of rest. I am but one to see
The rising of another sun.
In dark despair, millions, beside,
Are living in a land so rich
With all that man could ever need
That neither hunger, cold nor thirst,
Nor want of rest should ever come
To mar a single human breast.
Yet more than half the race, like me,"
He said, "lack something from the full
Supply of bread; lack something from
The garments that should form a shield
From cold to keep them ever warm;
Lack something from the buoyancy
Of hope, as faintly or in dire
Despair they grope through all their lives.
I am but one. When I am fed,
What may be done for me is not
A step to set my fellows free.

To take through pity fire and food
And bed is but another way,"
The old man said, "to tell us we
Are only slaves whom nature has
Made free. The coal that through the earth
In veinlets runs is but the rays
Of countless setting suns. Yet men
More strong, more cunning and more fleet,
Have seized upon this stored-up light
And heat; and when men freeze, no voice
Is raised to say, 'Give this man what
Is his, not charity.' When rays
Of light mingled with heat and rain
Have built vast fields of waving corn
And grain, the old, the weak, the blind,"
He sadly said, "are not the men
Who freely eat this bread. 'Tis doled
To them as when the keeper feeds
The lions in their den. Most base
Those lions if they roar and chafe
And make their generous keepers feel
Unsafe; if they with cruel hate
Would tear the men who placed and who
Have fed them there. Bad and most base,
These men, if they have hotly spurned
To take as gifts what they themselves
Have earned. Base, too, and dangerous
If he asserts his right to life
And liberty. Kind maid, I read
The pity in your face at this
Unnatural and foul disgrace.
Stop not with me: ask only why
Good men are left exposed to die

Whose only sin is that they would
Not hoard while others languished round
An empty board; whose virtues were
At once the potent spell to drag
Them headlong down from heaven to hell;
Whose thought of others would not let
Them rest happy in gains while those
Were left distressed. Know well, kind maid,
That neither saint nor sage can solve
This puzzling problem of the age
Till they admit that which we all
May see, that no man need to live
In poverty. No falser view
Is held beneath the sun than that
Men merit for what they have done.
If eye is quick and nimble is
The hand, if brain is active and
At full command—if with these powers
The gifted man can do with ease
The work that would be done by two,
While each is wholly faithful to
His trust, they share alike if the
Award be just."

"Old man, O, much
I pity your sad lot, but these
Vagaries surely help you not.
Since time began, men have believed
It true that all should have reward
For what they *do*. If one can clothe
A hundred naked men while yet
Another man can clothe but ten,
Who that would honor right can fail
To say the first should have the ten

Fold better pay? Who hired these men
Would be adjudged a fool if he
Should think to follow such a rule.
Who holds this rule, if he were judged
As sane, would with the struggling mass
Compete in vain. The product 'tis
That regulates the fee. Motive
Has but a moral quality.
He who can most produce can bring
Most pay for him to whom he gives
His hours away. Another view
Were fatal to the man. Not 'what
We wish,' but simply 'what we can.'
The old are less productive and
Must face this problem bravely in
A losing race. Here charity
And love and hope unite to cheer
The loser in this bitter fight.
Here see the rich, with sympathy
Profound, on men impoverished
To scatter blessings round. See them
The noblest Christian grace display,
Giving in pity half their wealth
Away. These painful contrasts have
Their better side; one fosters grace,
The other humbles pride. The rich
In giving emulate the skies;
They nobly stoop to help the poor
Man rise. He takes their gifts and when
His prayer is said 'tis sweetly this,
'Only our daily bread.' Some men
Want more; but these are well content
To meekly take that which has thus

Been sent. So in sweet harmony
These all must live—the half to take,
The other half to give!”

The old

Man heard. Said he, “Yes, motive is
A moral quality, and deeds
However many and how great
Have as a measure only a
Commercial rate. Most that you say
Is quite too sadly true. Men must
Be measured *now* by what they *do*.
Another standard would this world
O'erthrow and on its ruins plant
New seeds another world to grow—
A world so new that nowhere could
You see men making ill and then
The remedy; making men poor
Then for awhile, instead, op'ning
The purse to give these wretches bread;
Taking their labor without pay,
Then giving half the wealth, they took,
Away—a world so altered that
You could not see men taking toil
And giving charity.”

“Can such

A world as you have named be had—
A world so good with those who make
It, bad? If hearts are wicked and if
Men from birth cling not to heaven
But only cling to earth, how can
The darkness ever change to light,
How can the day be ushered from
The night? The struggles and the cares

Of life, the competitions and
The deadly strife will help high heaven
To bring the world you say where all
That's bad is driven quite away."

"Banish the thought that men are bad.
Nowhere not even bad men wish
To see this cold, this hunger and
This pain in me. Like you, their hearts
Are tender. In the strife they seek
Alone the guarding of their life.
Self-preservation and an equal
Right they will maintain. This sense
Of right, so strong within their breast,
They will maintain against the right
Of all the rest. If pain must come
To one, that pain must be outside
Of self—to others, not to me.
Give men this pledge of equal right
And there will be in them no mark
Of base depravity. Motives
Will then be pure. The moving force
Will be the common good. If aught
Is left in man of bad, 'twill be
But sickness, not depravity."

"'Tis strange that one so wretched can
Defend the nobleness of man;
While I, of every earthly good
Possessed, would claim man base and heaven
Only blessed."

"You see, fair maid,
With but a partial eye. You ask

What is, but not the reason why.
Deceived, you see the sun mount in
The sky. 'Tis the horizon nods
His passing by. You see men fight
In the unequal strife to gain
Full oft but the bare crumbs of life.
Passions are but the passive sun.
Conditions nod and wildly urge
Them on. Change the conditions and
You see how sweet the most disturbed
Of lives may be. When motives to
The wrong are dead, each virtue to
Each virtue will be wed, and on
The ruins of a world of strife
Will rise a great and newer world
Of life. I have no hate for those
Who do me ill. They mar my life,
They make my hours sad—the men
Are good but the conditions bad.
Politically now some men
Are free, but all the world are slaves
Industrially. Let this brave end
Be reached, and surely I should not
Be left in age to basely die
In cold and hunger and without
A bed, while in the mines and on
The distant plain slumbers the coal
And wave the burdened fields of grain,
While from the seas the swimming fowls
May shed their glossy down to make
For me a bed. With toiling men,
Let this belated thought have birth,
'Not justice there,' but 'justice here

On earth,' and like a whirlwind from
The darkened skies, out of the gloom
Of ages, there will rise a man
So good, in him one could not trace
More than the shadowy image of
A race like that we see steeped to
The dregs in direst misery.
Check not the noble impulse that
Would stay my passing grief and drive
My pain away, but give it scope
And bid it crush the seeds that men
Call flowers, but which are rankling weeds.
Bid it the flames of discontent
To fan till all shall freely own
The brotherhood of man. In her
Poised balance, Justice then will see
No man outweighed by property.
Give scope to that grand passion which
Would shed its burning tears at sight
Of men ill fed, and bid it seek,
Amid the social strife, a new
And higher social form of life,
Where no brave heart by one false step
Can be a hopeless wreck upon
A seething sea; where blameless ills
That on the weak may fall become
The common heritage of all;
Where no success in life shall e'er
Depend on this, that there, forsooth,
The fortunes of another man
Must end, but where the good of each
Must always be the fullest good
Of the community. Life is

Too short, fair maid, that we should try
The pool, replenished, to dip dry.
'Twere easier and better far
To turn the turbid rills that come
Full laden from the distant hills,
And only let the water that
Is sweet fill the fair lakelet at
Our feet."

"Mankind with mankind here
Must strive, heaven keeping but the strong
And fit alive. The weak must die.
In this, high heaven can see evolved
For man his highest destiny.
To him each flower and bird and tree
Evolves alike. 'All things subsist
By elemental strife: passions
Are but the elements of life.'
Man like the rest is overwhelmed
With care—his sorrow here and his
Enjoyment there. Through all the chain
We see this thread ascend, the birth
Pains here and heaven at the end.
How turbulent soe'er our lives
May be, 'tis but the rooting of
The tree by winter storms. Is man
Not bold if he shall say that he,
Than heaven, has a better way?"

"'Twas always thus, O, erring maid.
Man seems but bold who cannot be
Afraid to say that when the weak
Are tortured by the strong there is
And must be something wholly wrong.

Nature seems cruel; everywhere
Seems blind below the suffering stage—
The realm of mind. Here man must rule
And in his might must say, 'I know
And will perfect a better way.
The free-born mind within me shall
Not tread the cruel pathway of
The dead past ages. I will be,
Like the Great Heart above, full free
Of every bond but the sweet bond
Of love.' Go, maid, and thoughtful learn
How base is a philosophy
Of life which in the sweetest phrase,
'Be unto others good and true
As you would have them be to you.'
Then with confession, O, most base,
Most base, makes man a runner in
Competing race where he who fails
In the unequal strife wrecks oft
The future of his earthly life, the
Lives of others, helpless and
Forlorn—the lives of innocents
As yet unborn, blots out all hope
And makes the hopeless feel his first
Kind respite when the naked steel
Cuts off his life. No principle
Of ethics can be right that, while
It teaches love, will yet coquette
With might. When men have learned to think
Aright, the choice will be between
A race cut off from earth and one
So fully free that there will be
No man that o'er his fellow-man

Will have a mastery—no man
That e'er will wish or dare to say
That other creatures shall obey
His royal nod. The holiday
Of life will be to place the crown
Upon the human race, which, till
This hour, with base subservience
Has been placed on the heads alone
Of men who, most unhappy, did
Not, could not see in this strange act
A fatal destiny. Go, go,
Kind heart, and join that better few
Who would forget the old and who
Would make the new a true and just
Philosophy, where help, not strife,
Shall smooth, not roughen, all the paths
Of life; where frankness, not deceit,
Where hope, not fear, shall help
To bring us nearer and more near
To the divine, the perfect stage
Of love—within us and above.
I, Tender Heart, 'I am but one.'"

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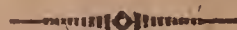
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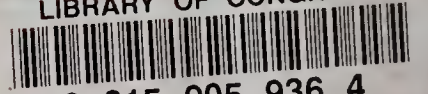
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